



## ARTICLE

# Mobilising the masses: a grass-roots communication strategy for TTIP

---

Michael Schneider

Published online: 30 November 2015  
© The Author(s) 2015. This article is published with open access at Springerlink.com

**Abstract** The US and the EU have set an ambitious goal of completing the negotiations on the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership by the end of 2015. Because this is not a conventional trade and investment agreement, stakeholders have demanded a more open and transparent debate. This article will consider the advantages of a communication strategy which is rooted in local European communities and the role that local and regional authorities can play in bringing the message to Europe's regions and cities.

**Keywords** Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership | Grass-roots communication strategy | Democracy | Local authorities

---

M. Schneider (✉)  
European Committee of the Regions, Rue Belliard 99–101, 1000 Brussels, Belgium  
e-mail: epp@cor.europa.eu

## Introduction

The US and the EU began negotiations on the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) in July 2013. The resulting deal will affect almost 40 % of world GDP and have a significant impact on market access for goods, services and investments (European Commission 2015). It will therefore create benefits for citizens and businesses—including SMEs, which are the backbone of economic activity in many European regions.

It is estimated that TTIP will save companies millions of euros and create hundreds of thousands of new jobs on both sides of the Atlantic. According to official estimates from the European Commission (2013), the average European household could save €545 per year and European GDP may increase by nearly 0.5 %. These are welcome forecasts as many Europeans have yet to see the effects of economic recovery following the financial crisis.

Given the extent of the deal and its impact on citizens, democratic control of the negotiations must be guaranteed at all times. The TTIP negotiations have been met with severe criticism as lacking transparency. Moreover, anti-TTIP campaigners claim the deal will lead to a lowering of environmental, food safety and other standards. The speed and power of the Internet and social media mean that these fears, misconceptions and myths have been spread amongst citizens.

Whilst both the EU and the US have underlined the need for confidentiality, efforts have also been made to improve transparency by including relevant stakeholders in discussions, dialogues and open meetings. More specifically, the European Committee of the Regions (CoR), the EU's Assembly of Regional and Local Representatives, welcomed the decision by the Council of the EU on 9 October 2014 to publish the negotiating directives for talks on TTIP (European Committee of the Regions 2015b; Council of the European Union 2014a). This decision has been hailed as a step in the direction of greater transparency. However, the CoR also noted its regret that this took place several months after the text had already been leaked online.

It is also widely accepted that member states and the European Commission should step up their efforts to communicate the benefits of TTIP and that the need for transparency and dialogue with civil society should be embraced (European Council 2015). Whilst the Information Working Party's proposal on how the EU's communication strategy on TTIP could be enhanced is still eagerly awaited, the CoR believes this strategy should go one step further and incorporate the EU's local and regional authorities. Unless this happens, it will be difficult for citizens to see—and to have confidence—that the EU is working towards economic growth and job creation across Europe whilst maintaining a high level of protection for the environment, health, safety, consumers and data privacy.

With this in view, the EPP Group in the CoR would like to propose a communication strategy that is focused on stories of real-life experiences from local communities,

stories that address the concerns of citizens and show how TTIP will offer significant benefits. This strategy needs to be both transparent and balanced to counterbalance the unsubstantiated negative view which is prevalent in the media in many EU member states.

## Biased media pose a problem

There is a great deal of information in the public domain. The media are also following developments closely. For the most part, however, media coverage has tended to be negative. There is also a new player in the game: the social media activists who are energised by civil society and grass-roots-style communication. Moreover, their communication style is much more social in the sense that it both encourages people to share and exchange ideas and information, and promotes two-way debate.

During the TTIP negotiations, there have been attempts to improve transparency and ‘educate’ the public by providing even more information and putting the negotiating documents in the public domain. Despite this, it would appear that in several member states the emotion-charged narratives of these growing large-scale, bottom-up movements, combined with a biased media, are giving rise to a growing public misperception of and general scepticism towards TTIP.

In 2014 the European Commission stated that it would invest in a communication strategy which aims to ‘explain the basics of the negotiations and to address criticism’ (Council of the European Union 2014b). Despite this promise, this communication strategy does not seem to be forthcoming. The CoR would therefore like to see both the EU and the US make a greater effort to provide information in order to counter rumours and false information that aim to discredit TTIP by distorting the facts. This will require much more than simply ensuring that the information is available online, especially given that the well-documented myths will live on in people’s minds long after they have been disproved.

Moreover, in today’s online debate about TTIP, populist left-wing and anti-globalisation groups express minority views—but views that get traction. ‘Pro-market activists are hardly, if at all, visible’, writes Matthias Bauer (2015), a senior economist at the European Centre for International Political Economy, a think tank dedicated to trade and economic policy. He argues that people are often hesitant to share their personal views with friends, family or colleagues if they think their ideas differ from the more socially accepted opinion. This becomes particularly relevant in a time when social media plays an important part in communication. This ‘spiral of silence’ could therefore mean that more citizens decide not to question the myths. Bauer (2015) continues: ‘it is time for the advocates of TTIP . . . to make their voice heard beyond conferences and official hearings in order to prevent the spiral of silence to put an end to a promising trade agreement.’

## TTIP is a local issue

It is under these conditions that the political representatives closest to European citizens—the local and regional politicians—can play an important role. It is they who are well placed to highlight hard data on the scope of TTIP and on the impact of the agreement on people's everyday lives. As already witnessed in some countries, citizens are putting pressure on their elected representatives to speak out and insist on more information. Much of Europe is still recovering from the financial and economic crisis, and thus economic concerns are high. People want to hear stories that they can relate to. Hence, we must respond by basing our communication activities on concrete experiences and by communicating in a way that encourages citizens to join the debate.

TTIP will have an impact on a number of areas where local and regional authorities have competences: for example, in policies related to health, safety and the environment. Public procurement and the regulation of public services may also be affected by the treaty. From the perspective of local and regional authorities, it is essential that the final deal strikes the right balance between free trade benefits and preserving the ability of these authorities to protect the general interests of their citizens. Within this context, local and regional authorities must also retain the right to set public policies and standards for all fields falling within their remit.

It must also be understood that the expected benefits from TTIP are perceived very differently in the different regions and cities of Europe. This was underlined by Commissioner for Trade Cecilia Malmström during a debate with the CoR: 'What you say here in Brussels is based on a deep understanding of people in your region. And when you speak about European policy at home you can connect our work to their lives like no other part of the EU system. That's why your role in the public discussion about this negotiation is so important' (European Committee of the Regions [2015a](#)).

As mentioned earlier, some steps have been taken to increase transparency and to involve local and regional authorities in the TTIP negotiations. For example, the chair of the CoR's Economic and Monetary Commission and the CoR rapporteur on TTIP have been granted access to the classified documents in the European Commission's TTIP reading room. However, they are not allowed to make copies of the documents there, and any handwritten notes must be made on watermarked paper. It is therefore not clear how this information can be used to improve communication on the ground.

## Communication strategy

It is essential that elected local and regional authorities, represented in the EU through the CoR, should be a mouthpiece for the people. Not only are they ideally placed to deliver information, but they can also encourage two-way communication and bring the concerns of citizens to the negotiating table in Brussels. In an opinion adopted by the CoR in December 2014, local and regional authorities argue that reconnecting Europe

with its citizens requires more and better communication at local level (European Committee of the Regions 2014). Furthermore, it states, ‘The emergence of dialogue with and between citizens will allow two-way communication and feedback from grassroots level’ (European Committee of the Regions 2014, 4). It goes without saying that local and regional authorities alone will not be able to close the information gap. However, together with the experts appointed in each European Commission representation office, it may be possible to communicate more effectively on TTIP and to organise tailor-made communication activities in Europe’s regions and cities.

Furthermore, coordinated action by the EU institutions, the member states and regional and local authorities is the best means of strengthening the relationship between governments and their citizens, who are increasingly demanding a greater role in policymaking. In a digital world, citizens are surrounded by people representing a wide range of views. The EU has a responsibility to provide citizens with balanced materials that can guide discussions and allow citizens to form their own opinions. Let us not forget that grass-roots movements and street-level politics can encourage powerful democratic change. This happened, for example, during US President Barack Obama’s 2008 presidential campaign and in the 2015 local elections in Spain.

The US has also recognised the need to go local when communicating about the importance of trade and TTIP, and the impact the agreement will have on communities. This was stressed in Ambassador Michael Froman’s remarks to the National Association of Counties:

For most Americans, you’re the first face of government. . . . Trade policy might not be at the top of your agenda every day. You’ve got roads to fix and schools to manage. But done right, trade policy is a necessary component of any community’s successful economic strategy. . . . [W]e look forward to working with all of you to underscore the importance of trade—done right—to your communities. (Froman 2015)

## Conclusion

Local communities will benefit from TTIP, but they also have concerns. They should be informed properly so that this information can be passed on to wider communities. The current impasse has its roots in the early days of the TTIP negotiations. Today the EU needs to commit to a communication strategy which focuses on being utterly transparent and sending forth a message citizens can relate to—which means a message based on stories and real-life experiences. Regardless of the effort currently being made by the European Commission and the White House, the debate will remain limited and distant to citizens unless local and regional authorities are involved. In today’s Internet society, nobody can argue that there is insufficient information on TTIP and the negotiations online. However, to enable citizens to take their own positions, local authorities, companies, civil society and advocacy groups all have to play their role.

This call from the CoR comes at the right time given that *The Economist/YouGov Polls* (2015) suggest that nearly half of the citizens have not yet made up their minds about TTIP.

The CoR issued its opinion in February 2015, at a relatively early stage in the proceedings (European Committee of the Regions 2015b). Almost a year later, there is still a lack of comprehensive data on the specific impact the TTIP provisions will have on each of Europe's regions, municipalities and cities. As statistical projections and economic forecasts become available, it will be easier to understand what this impact will be and how it can best be communicated in a more targeted way to citizens.

At this critical stage there is a significant concern that it will not be possible to change the nature of the debate and get European citizens on board. Moreover, the anti-TTIP campaigners have transformed the way TTIP is being negotiated, and perhaps this holds for future trade deals as well. But what is already clear is that a communication strategy should be drawn up with the intention of focusing more on jobs and trade and that this strategy should have citizens and local businesses at its heart.

**Open Access** This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License which permits any use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author(s) and the source are credited.

## References

- Bauer, M. (2015). How anti-TTIP groups dominate online media in Germany. *Atlantic-community.org*, 24 February. <http://www.atlantic-community.org/-/how-anti-ttip-groups-dominate-online-media-in-germany>. Accessed 16 September 2015.
- Council of the European Union. (2014a). *Directives for the negotiation on the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership between the European Union and the United States of America*. 11103/13, 9 October. <http://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-11103-2013-DCL-1/en/pdf>. Accessed 16 September 2015.
- Council of the European Union. (2014b). Working Party on Information on 17 October 2014. 14713/14, 24 October. <http://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-14713-2014-INIT/en/pdf>. Accessed 16 September 2015.
- European Commission. (2013). *Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership: The economic analysis explained*. September. [http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2013/september/tradoc\\_151787.pdf](http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2013/september/tradoc_151787.pdf). Accessed 16 September 2015.
- European Commission. (2015). How TTIP would affect you. <http://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/in-focus/ttip/about-ttip/impact/>. Accessed 16 September 2015.
- European Committee of the Regions. (2014). Reconnecting Europe with its citizens: More and better communication at local level. CDR 4460/2014, 3 December. <http://>

[www.toad.cor.europa.eu/corwipdetail.aspx?folderpath=CIVEX-V/049&id=23046](http://www.toad.cor.europa.eu/corwipdetail.aspx?folderpath=CIVEX-V/049&id=23046). Accessed 16 September 2015.

European Committee of the Regions. (2015a). EU regions eager to exploit TTIP potential but urge for guarantees on public services and protection standards. Press release, 13 February. <http://cor.europa.eu/en/news/Pages/ttip-potential.aspx>. Accessed 16 September 2015.

European Committee of the Regions. (2015b). *The Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP)*. CDR 5385/2014, 12 February. <http://www.toad.cor.europa.eu/corwipdetail.aspx?folderpath=ECOS-V/063&id=23213>. Accessed 16 September 2015.

European Council. (2015). Conclusions, 19 and 20 March 2015. [http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/european-council/2015/03/european-council-conclusions-march-2015-en\\_pdf/](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/european-council/2015/03/european-council-conclusions-march-2015-en_pdf/). Accessed 16 September 2015.

Froman, M. (2015). Remarks by Ambassador Michael Froman to the National Association of Counties. Speech given in Washington, DC on 23 February 2015. Office of the United States Trade Representative. <https://ustr.gov/about-us/policy-offices/press-office/speechestranscripts/2015/february/remarks-ambassador-michael-0>. Accessed 29 October 2015.

*The Economist*/YouGov Poll. (2015). 13–15 June. [https://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus\\_uploads/document/8h6hq2m8mr/March\\_Eurotrack\\_Website.pdf#page=2](https://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/document/8h6hq2m8mr/March_Eurotrack_Website.pdf#page=2). Accessed 16 September 2015.



**Michael Schneider** is the President of the European People's Party Group in the European Committee of the Regions and the Envoy of the State of Saxony-Anhalt to the German Federal Government.